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ROSANNA PORTER ON THE BOOKS THAT SHE AND LYNDA PORTER, HER SISTER-IN-LAW, PRODUCE



Anacortes illustrator Lynda Porter (left) and Bellingham author Rosanna Porter (sisters-in-law) recently won a Moonbeam Children's Book Bronze Medal award for their second collaborative book in a series "Tofu Ling and the Carp Banner."

'Tofu Ling and the Carp Banner'

Author
Rosanna Porter
Illustrator
Lynda Porter
Publisher
Raisykinder
Publishing
Pages
48
Price
\$12

■ To purchase the book or participate in online educational games, visit www.raisykinderpublishing.com

Moonbeam award shines its light on sisters-in-law

Story by
BEVERLY
CRICHFIELD
Photo by
FRANK
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Herald

Who would have known the magic combination for an award-winning children's book could be found just an in-law away?

Former teacher Rosanna Porter had been fishing around for a suitable illustrator for her first children's book, "Tofu Ling," about a small mouse whose family learns the meaning of cooperation to survive a harsh winter together. She'd sent her book to several publishing houses in New York who

wanted to pair her with illustrators of their choice.

But Porter wasn't impressed. The suggested illustrations were too "cartoonish," too childish for a book Porter had meant more as literature with a message than silly fun.

"I wanted this book to be good literature and good art," the Bellingham resident said.

On a whim, Porter decided to send a manuscript to her sister-in-law, Lynda Porter, a successful artist who had worked with various art groups around the world and had created an art and music program for

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students with special needs.

Rosanna asked Lynda to provide a few illustrations for her book — just to see what she could offer.

To Rosanna's delight, Lynda's illustrations were the perfect fit.

"As soon as I saw the beauty of what she'd done, I said, 'This is it!'" Rosanna said.

Turns out, it was an award-winning combination, earning the Bronze Medal in the 2009 Moonbeam Children's Book Awards for the duo's second self-published book in the Tofu Ling series, "Tofu Ling and the Carp Banner."

The Moonbeam Awards are considered one of North America's most prestigious children's literary awards, honoring independent or traditionally published authors for books that, according to the Web site, "not only celebrate the joys of childhood, but also help kids and families deal with its challenges."

Awards are given in 36 categories covering a variety of styles, subjects and age groups. "Tofu" competed against more than 1,000 submissions from authors in 32 states, five Canadian provinces and seven other countries.

This isn't the first time that the duo's books have been noticed in the children's books community. They've received nominations for the annual Caldecott Children's Book Awards, the Teacher's Choice Award, the Boston Globe Horn Book Award, the American Institute of Graphic Arts 50/50 Book Award and more.

The two women say their books are distinguishable from many other

children's books by their expansive target age range (birth to 11 years), the length of their texts and the refusal to "dumb down" the language.

"It's meant to be savored over a longer period of time," Rosanna said. "We feel that children must hear a higher vocabulary than they speak."

In addition, each of the books concludes with detailed educational games and activities involving math, spelling, social studies, writing and more that children can do with their parents.

The books are of the kind that a person could expect from two former teachers.

Rosanna always has been interested in writing. She jokes that she wrote her first "in-house" (self-published) book at age 8.

"I've always written stories, and even as a child, I've been somewhat of a daydreamer," Rosanna said.

She graduated from the University of Akron with a degree in education in 1990. She did her honors research project on how to better teach the hows and whys of geography to American Indian children. At the time, she encouraged using literature and stories to help students understand geographic concepts.

Then she went on to teach elementary and secondary school for another six years.

Through her college professors, Rosanna was recommended for a job with Rand McNally, publisher of travel maps and materials, writing eight textbooks on geography for fourth- and 12th-grade students. She later began conducting workshops and tried to come up with innovative ways for educators to teach geography.

During that time, she conceived the idea of writing a story about

a mouse — something that could teach children about valuable moral lessons and about geography and other cultures. The idea came when she was trying to find ideas for writing her books.

Her friends at Rand McNally encouraged her, and she began to formulate a story line and defined her main character.

Rosanna worked on the story and then decided to try to farm it out to a few publishers. But it became clear that she would have to relinquish much of the control over the book and how it was put together. And the art wouldn't be what she had in mind.

So she approached Lynda, who in 1995 was preparing to move to Belgium.

Lynda had a bachelor's degree in art education and had been teaching art and music to special education kids. At the International School of Brussels, Lynda was active with the school's fine arts committee and later, while living in England, with the American Community School, where her illustrations were used in publications and sent throughout the world.

"All of that background kind of helped me to develop this style I have," Lynda said.

Rosanna gave few indications of what she wanted when she sent the manuscript for her first book, Lynda said.

"She never does, and I really appreciate that," Lynda said. The lack of explicit instructions gave Lynda the freedom she craved to come up with her own vision of the story.

It was a vision that clicked instantly with Rosanna.

Lynda spends hours researching aspects of Rosanna's stories, which often include references or

traditions of other cultures. Both Rosanna and Lynda have spent years overseas.

"On the first reading (of her first book), you think it's a very sensitive story about values. But as you read more, you realize there are many layers," Lynda said.

Rosanna's story ideas usually come from experiences in life, including the idea for "Tofu and the Carp Banner." In the story, Tofu Ling is planning to earn his coveted green belt in a Taekwondo competition. But a family tragedy on the eve of the competition has him making a tough decision.

Rosanna had been teaching Taekwondo classes to a group of children who thought they were coming to learn how to "beat up somebody," she said. Instead, Rosanna said the children learned through the principles of Taekwondo that true strength comes from respect and responsibility.

"I can be anywhere and the ideas hit me," Rosanna said.

Early on, Rosanna decided to take control of her books, setting up her own publishing company, Raisykinder Publishing. The duo quickly came up with two other books after "Tofu Ling," using the little brown mouse again to help teach children values.

They recently finished publishing their third book, "Tofu Ling and the Angel," and already are working on a fourth, "Tofu Ling Sets Sail," scheduled for release in the fall of 2010.

Now that the Porters have a few books under their belt, Rosanna Porter has opened her publishing company to other authors who are interested in bringing their visions to life.

"I would like to give others the same opportunity," she said.

Best-sellers

FICTION

1. "Nine Dragons," by Michael Connelly (Little, Brown: \$27.99). An LAPD detective travels to Hong Kong to solve the murder of a Chinese immigrant.
2. "The Lost Symbol," by Dan Brown (Doubleday: \$25.99). Harvard professor Robert Langdon uses his symbology skills to find a missing Freemason in Washington, D.C.
3. "The Help," by Kathryn Stockett (Putnam: \$24.95). The lives of a maid, a cook and a college graduate become intertwined while changing a Mississippi town.
4. "Pursuit of Honor," by Vince Flynn (Atria: \$27.99). Two counter-terrorism operatives deal with the fallout from a deadly terrorist attack.

NONFICTION

1. "Manhood for Amateurs," by Michael Chabon (Harper: \$26.99). A collection of autobiographical essays reflecting on what it means to be a man and father.
2. "Outliers," by Malcolm Gladwell (Little, Brown: \$27.99). An exploration of the backgrounds of high achievers.
3. "Have a Little Faith," by Mitch Albom (Hyperion: \$23.99). Albom's observations of a rabbi and a pastor on an eight-year journey of faith.
4. "True Compass," by Edward Kennedy (Twelve: \$35). The memoirs of the late U.S. senator from Massachusetts.

■ Rankings for hard-cover books sold in Southern California. Distributed by the Los Angeles Times.